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Historical genesis of corporal punishment and its effects in shaping teacher's perception in West Bengal, India

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Abstract

In every human society, the social structure is governed by the system of social order. In India, the concept of society is different from that in Western countries. Similarly, the society of ancient India differed significantly from that of modern India. Historically, India juxtaposes the differences of various races, cultures, ethnicities, and religions. It was a source of treasure for both the invaders and migrants. On the other hand, punishment is viewed as a consequence of both crime and sin. Society establishes certain moral and social obligations for its members, and everyone is expected to abide by them. Citizens are required to follow these rules, and when exceptional situations arise within the territory, the state holds the authority to address them. In this way, punishment is imposed on individuals who violate established norms. Corporal punishment is a form of punishment that involves physical torture, and it is used to inflict physical pain or suffering. In the present time, corporal punishment has become a significant challenge to social existence. This study attempted to address the relationship between cultural practices and their consequences in the moral development of both teachers and students. Legal frameworks, such as the Right to Education (RTE) and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), have had a moderate influence on teaching. However, teachers maintained high engagement and professionalism, as well as supportive classroom environments. These results suggest that fostering empathetic, non-punitive teaching practices can enhance student engagement and teacher–student relationships across diverse educational contexts.

1 Introduction

The structure of Indian society was developed based on the social hierarchy system (Singer and Kohn, 1968). From the very beginning of social formations, the concepts of society and societal laws played an important role (Sadasivan, 2020). If we examine the historical development of Indian society chronologically, we can get an elaborate understanding of the complexity and order of the Indian sub-continent that developed and emerged over the decades (Sastri, 2022). This helps in understanding the innate nature of Indian ethics, laws, crime, and judiciary.

In the early Vedic period, the ancient judicial system was developed based on Dharma, Vyavahara, Charitra, and Rajasana (Trehan, 2022). Dharma was interpreted as Civil and Criminal law; vyavahara was interpreted as procedural law, and edicts of Kings were interpreted as Constitutional law. Danda was the central idea in this context. According to Manu, *Danda* was further categorized into four major segments (Manu, 1419; Sondhi, 2023). These segments were Vak-danda (admonition), Dhik-danda (censure), Dhana-danda (penalty), and Badha-danda (physical punishment). The fundamental approach regarding punishment was theorized in Hindu law under various philosophical observations. The ancient laws differed based on their legal proceedings as Artha Vivada (civil disputes) and Himsa Samudbhava Vivada (criminal disputes). Criminal disputes were further sub-categorized as Danda Parusya (assault), Vak Parusya (defamation), Sahasa (murder or other

physical offences), and Strisangrahana (adultery). Further punishment was also categorized as deterrent, retributive, and reformative based on their philosophical understandings.

In the later Vedic period, the Aryans settled beside the banks of the Ganges and Yamuna and crossed the mountain of Vindhyas and reached the banks of the river Godavari. During this period, the social structure became complicated. In the entire Vedic civilization, sacrifice was a priority for the demonstration of religious practices. Religious practices were determined by some specific sutras named *Kalpa Sutras,* which were inherited by the people from generation to generation through oral traditions through the ages. Sutras were *'sacred percept'*. It was a part of the *Mundukya Upanishadas* or the *Mundukya Vedanga*. It explained various rituals, ritualistic sacrifices, various laws, and taboos. These sutras were made by the ancient sages to make it precise and easy to remember for the people. These sutras were: *Srauta Sutras* — they dealt with public sacrifices, which were mostly related to rituals; *Griha Sutras* — they dealt with family related matters, like childbirth and marriage ceremony; and *Dharma Sutras* — they dealt with morals, ethics, crime, laws, and practices. It defined the duty of civilians in society. Various social and ethical matters were discussed through it. It provided the ancient state's policy and administrative structures. Furthermore, it became the basis of various samhitas like Manu, Yagyabalkya, and Narada (Gopalan, 1992).

2 RigVeda polity

K.P. Jayaswal, in his book *Hindu Polity,* argued that *"The hymns of the Rik and Atharvan, the view of Mahabharata and the tradition which Megasthenes heard in India in the 4th century B.C., all point to the fact that republican form of government in India came long after monarchy, and after the early Vedic age Hindu Polity"* (Jayaswal, 1943). Initially, early Aryan society was tribal in nature, and the village-based community formed the fundamental unit and primary source of the RigVedic polity. There was no concept of *Rashtra* (Kingdom) that had emerged. It was developed in the post-Vedic period, where the term '*Jana*' was replaced by the term '*Gana*'. Administrative policy was maintained by the village authorities. The *Purohitas* were engaged in sacrifices. They performed their various role based on their ranks. *Hotri* was the invoker; he recited the hymns of the Rigveda. *Adhvaryu* was the executer who recited the hymns of the Yajurveda and *Udgatri* as the singer who recited the hymns from the SamVedas. Besides Brahmana, there were *Senani*, *Kulapas,* and *Gramini*. *Sabha* and *Samities* were the major assemblies where tribe related problems were discussed. Every tribe has its own chief who performs as the protector of the state (Sharma, 1959).

3 Types and nature of punishment

3.1 Judicial system during early Vedic period

During the early Vedic period, there were no clear references that indicated the existence of a formal judicial system (Trehan, 2022). Local communities managed their daily issues according to the characteristics of their region, culture, language, and religious practices. However, it is difficult to generalize about the structure of their judicial processes (Dhavan, 2025). Most Hindu laws were revealed to ancient people through the four Vedic scriptures and were later elaborated upon in various *Smritis* and *Sastras*. The concept of *Dharma* formed the core of the Hindu judiciary, encompassing both legal and moral principles. In essence, the ancient judicial system was based on four primary pillars: sacred law (*Dharma*), evidence (*Vyavahara*), historical accounts (*Charitra*), and royal edicts (*Rajasasana*) (Trehan, 2022).

Dharma served as the primary foundation of the Hindu ethical system, understood through the pursuit of truthfulness. *Vyavahara* provided insight into the history of individuals, societies, cultures, and ethnology. Meanwhile, the edicts of kings were regarded as divine law, and *Rajadharma* or *Rajasasana* represented a synthesis of all these elements. Together, these four pillars formed the foundational structure of the modern Indian judiciary (Trehan, 2022).

Ancient legal texts such as the *Manusmriti* and the *Arthashastra* interpreted *Dharma* as encompassing civil and criminal law, *Vyavahara* as procedural law, and royal edicts as constitutional law (Nigam and Chandra, 2025). Scholars like Gautama, Vasistha, Apastamba, and Baudhayana outlined essential aspects of criminal law, but its structural formulation was

attributed to Manu. Notably, the ancient penal system was not a law of crimes in the modern sense; rather, it was a law of wrongs, emphasizing justice through compensation in the form of money, land, or property. These early legal principles would later influence both the enforcement of punishment and the broader social and religious frameworks of justice in ancient India.

3.2 Importance of Danda

The king's primary duty was to protect the innocent and punish wrongdoers. Manu's law code emphasized two key principles: first, the necessity of upholding law as a reflection of social 'reality,' and second, the forceful application of authority to maintain social order (Das Gupta, 1930). However, Manu's personal interests sometimes influenced his judgments; when self-interest threatened the social code of conduct, the law became indispensable. In his system, the essential component of *Dharma* was *Danda*—a mechanism of justice through which *Dharma* was upheld, and wrongdoers were punished.

In ancient philosophy, *Dharma* was enforced by the king, who was supported by six critical elements: ministers (*Amatyas*), castle (*Puras*), the state (*Rashtra*), treasury (*Kosha*), allies (*Suhrida*), and *Danda* (punishment). As a symbol of royal authority, *Danda* functioned as a form of justice and was an integral part of *Vyavahara*, ensuring that offenders were lawfully punished. According to Manu, *Danda* was primarily deterrent in nature, preventing individuals from committing unethical or illegal acts. He regarded it as a crucial tool to protect society from wrongdoing (Das Gupta, 1930).

Moreover, *Danda* played a vital role in maintaining the *Varnasrama* system. Manu believed that without the fear of *Danda*, societal norms and standards would be widely violated. Thus, he prescribed *Danda* not only as a means to curb crime and criminality but also as a mechanism to reinforce social divisions. While *Danda* maintained internal order, rulers also applied strategic approaches in external relations, forming a fourfold system of managing conflicts and maintaining authority.

3.3 Four–fold modes

According to Hindu law, there are four types of diplomacy, which were used in politics: *"Saam (conciliation), Daan (Gift), Veda (Rupture), and Danda (Force)"* (Mukherjee, 1997). *Saam neeti* involved initiatives to resolve conflicts between individuals, states, or kings. *Daan neeti* was derived from *Dana*, involved gifts or compensations to influence others. *Danda neeti* referred to the use of force, which can take the form of killing, tormenting, and plundering. *Bhed neeti* employed cunning strategies, such as divide and rule.

Kautilya also advocated these four-fold modes in diplomacy in dealing with other kingdoms. *Saam* represented a friendly gesture by which a king seeks to reconcile with opponents, avoiding war and turning foes into allies. If *Saam neeti* fails, gifts or compensations, including land, wealth, and precious items (*Swarnamudra*), may be offered to secure loyalty or favor. Veda refers divide and rule policy and if all three fails to conquer enemy Danda become inevitable (Anaadi Foundation, 2025).

Similarly, Manu described four forms of punishment: *Vak-danda* (admonition), a verbal warning with minimal penalty; *Dhik-danda* (censure), a negative judgment with penalties proportionate to the offense; *Dhana-danda* (financial penalty); and *Badha-danda* (physical punishment), administered according to the law of wrongs (Indian Institute of Legal Studies, n.d.). These punishments were grounded in the deterrent theory, aimed at preventing crime by regulating human behavior, motivated by pleasure or the avoidance of suffering. Punishment served to maintain social order, uphold caste distinctions, and reinforce moral conduct, shaping offenders into responsible members of society. While it protected life, wealth, and social norms, it also posed challenges for reintegration, as punished individuals often struggled to regain dignity. Manu emphasized that fear of punishment was essential for societal stability, ensuring adherence to laws, social hierarchies, and norms such as *Anulom* and *Pratilom* marriages, making *Danda* both a corrective and regulatory instrument within the social and political framework. These measures were implemented through corporal punishment and other enforcement mechanisms, which ensured adherence to law and social norms.

3.4 Corporal punishment

In human society, evil is termed in two specific types: natural evil and moral evil. Natural evil is termed as a form of punishment given by God. In this category of punishment, humans have no control over it. Earthquakes, droughts, and famines are counted as natural forms of evil over which humans have no control. On the other hand, moral evil is considered a form of sin committed by humans. Punishment is administered to those who violate the moral purity of society (God's Utilitarian Deism, 2019). In ancient and medieval Indian context, punishment was administered under the following conditions— offences against the state/king, offences against public law and justice/positive law, offences against belief system/religion, offences against social moral and family welfare, injury to person, offences against property, counterfeiting of coins/valuable goods, violations of trade regulations, abuse, insults and defamation, offences regarding female modesty, and offences relating to cattle trespass, offences against the misconducting of weights and measures, witchcraft and sorcery, forgery and infringement and corruption (Das Gupta, 1930).

3.5 Sacrifice and punishment

Beyond practical enforcement, societal attitudes toward suffering and control were also reflected in religious and ritual practices, such as sacrifices.

In ancient India, sacrifice was thought to be acknowledged as the act of worshiping God. There was some common belief in worshipping, e.g., worshipping the God Indra for rain. In a common way, the ancient view of worshipping demands some sacrifice to make God happy. Sacrifice is a kind of performance that is maintained to keep their deity calm and happy.

According to the *Satapatha Brahmins,* humans are born with a debt. So, before they die, it is their duty to clear debts, which somehow contradict the concept of the *Rigvedas*. Sacrifices and *byboharas (duty)* are the entire thought that is mentioned in ancient text. Human values and truthfulness are all distinguished in relation to *Dharma*. But the *dharma* is not as same as it is described in the *Rigvedas*. The hymes of RigVedas were chiefly a process through which animals are offered with a belief that the the gods would become visible to the worshippers. In later period, it became rituals (Basham, 1989).

On the other hand, punishment was administered to maintain societal norms and standards to provide protection to its people. It is mostly deterrent in nature. It is a process to enforce dharma by safeguarding weak and faithful people from the evil one (Das Gupta, 1930). In later period, the laws of punishment became an integral procedure to protect its people and wealth. Punishment was considered as deterrent, preventive and corrective in nature. Understanding these historical and cultural foundations of punishment is essential for examining how corporal punishment is perceived, justified, and reproduced in educational settings, particularly among teachers in West Bengal, India.

4 Methodology

To empirically examine how historically embedded ideas of punishment manifest in contemporary educational settings, this study employed interviews and questionnaires among in-service teachers in West Bengal, India. The selection of in-service teachers (n = 50) was purposeful (**Fig. 1**). After collecting the questionnaires and interviews, the data was checked and thoroughly reviewed. In the questionnaire, most responses were obtained through fixed-choice options. However, for certain questions, some teachers marked an additional option on their own to reject the given choices, or they skipped the question altogether because it did not provide an option opposing corporal punishment. From their perspective, corporal punishment is completely unacceptable. A total of 11 teachers rejected the question that asked about the "preferable mode of punishment". Therefore, while calculating the percentages for that question, the data were analyzed based on the remaining responses.

In addition, the researcher conducted an open-ended interview with the resource person. All interview data were transcribed, organized, and analyzed after transcription. During transcription, the data were put into code depending on the formulation of meaning.

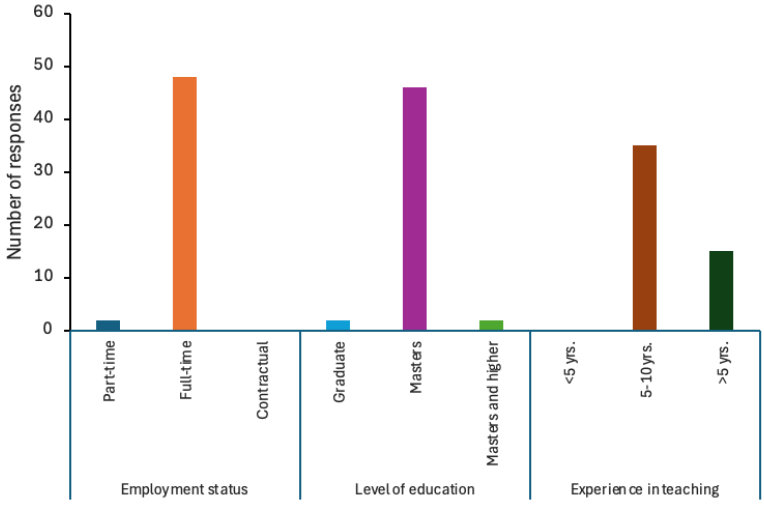

Fig. 1. Employment status, educational level, and teaching experience of respondent teachers.

5 Results and discussion

Most of the interviewed individuals were full-time teachers working in various institutions in West Bengal, India. The majority of them held a master's degree and had completed at least five years of teaching experience (**Figure 1**). This suggests their diverse perspectives, which may capture their experiences and practices. Most of the respondent teachers either did not experience punishment during their school life or could not clearly remember it (**Table 1**).

Table 1. School-life experiences of punishment by the respondent teachers.

Questions	Choices	Total responses
Experience of punishment in school life	1. Yes 2. Can't remember 3. No	12 10 28
Response about those teachers who hits	1. I did nothing punishable 2. I deserved it. 3. They hit intentionally	32 14 4
Stand against teacher during student life	1. Hate 2. Moderately hate 3. Don't hate	15 6 29
Present experience of the relevance of the past punishment	1. Agree 2. Not completely agreeing nor disagreeing 3. Disagree	14 14 22
Teacher-student relationship in the past	1. Better 2. No change 3. Not better	38 8 4
Fear of punishment as a factor to become friendly with teachers	1. Yes 2. Depends 3. No	8 31 11
Punishment as motivation in learning	1. Yes 2. Often 3. No	17 23 10
Remembrance of school teachers	1. Love & respect 2. Hate & fear 3. Both	32 2 16
Inspiring teachers	1. Who love and make jokes 2. Who loves and Punishes 3. Who punishes	26 24 0

Among those who were punished, many felt the punishment was undeserved, yet most did not develop hatred toward their teachers. Opinions were divided on the present relevance of past punishment, with more respondents disagreeing that it had a lasting impact. The majority reported having positive teacher–student relationships and remembered their teachers with love and respect. Fear of punishment was not strongly viewed as a factor in building friendly relationships, and while some teachers felt punishment could motivate learning, it was not universally accepted. Overall, teachers who were loving, humorous, or supportive were seen as more inspiring than those who relied solely on punishment.

The respondents considered that the teachers who love and make jokes and those who combine love with punishment as inspiring, while none view purely punitive teachers as inspiring (**Table 2**). A large majority reported very high interaction with students inside the classroom (a total 39 respondents), with the rest interacting often (n = 11). Classroom responses from students were also largely positive, with most responding very much (n = 32) or often (n = 17), and only one reporting no response. Student attendance during class was reported as obviously good by most respondents (n = 42). Overall classroom experience was rated as very good by 40 respondents, with the remaining 10 rating it as average. Similarly, experiences outside the classroom were mostly very good (n = 32), while some considered them average (n = 18). In maintaining discipline, most respondents preferred a moderate approach (n = 42), with fewer maintaining discipline strictly (n = 8), and none reporting no discipline.

The results showed a clear tendency among respondents against the use of corporal punishment in schools (**Table 3**). Most teachers (n = 30) stated that corporal punishment is never necessary, while only one strongly supported it. When students disobeyed, the majority (n = 43) preferred to ask the reason and apply non-physical punishment, and a large number (n = 36) strongly disagreed with using sticks to maintain discipline. Opinions on the need for corporal punishment in moral upbringing were mixed, with many respondents remaining neutral (n = 34) or rejecting it altogether (n = 14). Furthermore, most respondents (n = 38) agreed that discipline can be maintained without punishment, and a substantial number (n = 30) reported that they never punish students. When punishment was considered, mental or psychological methods (n = 26) were preferred over physical punishment (n = 5). Overall, most teachers (n = 31) opposed the involvement of corporal punishment, indicating a strong preference for alternative, non-physical disciplinary practices in schools.

Table 2. Present teaching practices and classroom experiences of respondent teachers.

Questions	Choices	Total responses
Inspiring teachers at present	1. Who love and make jokes 2. Who loves and Punishes 3. Who punishes	26 24 0
Interaction with students inside the classroom	1. Very much 2. Often 3. Never	39 11 0
Response in classroom	1. Very much 2. Often 3. Never	32 17 1
Student's attendance during class	1. Obviously 2. Generally 3. Not at all	42 8 0
Overall experience in classroom	1. Very good 2. Average 3. Very sad	40 10 0
Overall experience outside the classroom	1. Very good 2. Average 3. Very sad	32 18 0
Discipline maintaining	1. Strictly 2. Moderately 3. Never	8 42 0

Table 3. Perceptions and practices of corporal punishment.

Questions	Choices	Total responses
Necessity of corporal punishment in school	1. Very strongly 2. Moderately 3. Never	1 19 30
While students are disobeying	1. Hit him 2. Ask him why and punish physically 3. Ask him why and punish but not physically	1 6 43
Using sticks in maintaining discipline	1. Strongly agree 2. Moderately agree 3. Strongly disagree	3 11 36
Need of corporal punishment for moral upbringing	1. Agree 2. Neither agree nor disagree 3. Never	2 34 14
Discipline without punishment	1. Agree 2. Confused 3. Never	38 8 4
Reason of punishment	1. Students break moral instructions 2. Loosing temper 3. Never punish	20 0 30
Preferable mode of punishment	1. Physical 2. Mental 3. Both	5 26 8
Involvement of corporal punishment	1. Agree 2. Wants other like psychological punishment 4. No	5 14 31

When asked about concern over punishments, most respondents (38 out of 50) reported being "very much" concerned (**Fig. 2**). Regarding reasons for complaints against teachers, the majority (n = 34) cited a combination of love and strict discipline, while fewer attributed complaints to love with leniency (n = 9) or only love (n = 7). Interestingly, most respondents (n = 43) reported no fear of attending teacher-parent meetings, with only a small number expressing some or moderate apprehension.

Most teachers (n = 27) avoided punishing students due to unchanged attitudes, while 21 respondents cited conflict avoidance, and only 2 due to parental complaints (**Table 4**). A majority saw moderate effects of RTE (Right to Education) and NCPCR (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights) on teacher-student relationships (n = 35), and most (n = 35) considered themselves more professional than passionate. Legal matters were seen as

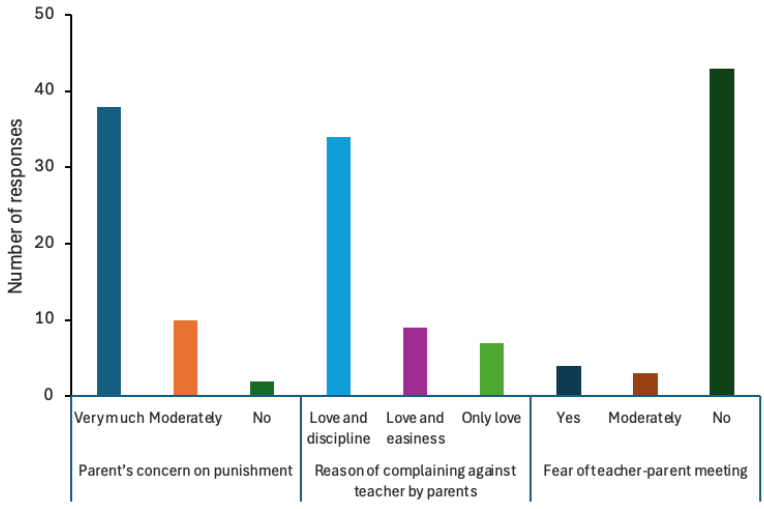

Fig. 2. Parents' role and responses to punishment.

Table 4. Legal framework, policy impact, and professional challenges.

Questions	Choices	Total responses
Withdrawal from punishing students	1. Because of parent's complain 2. Student's not so changed attitude 3. Teachers don't want problems	2 27 21
Effect of RTE & NCPCR on teacher-student relationship	1. Strongly agree 2. Moderately agree 3. No, completely disagree	14 35 1
Teachers are more professional than passionate	1. Strongly agree 2. Moderately agree 3. Disagree	4 35 1
Legal matters distracting to do jobs passionately	1. True 2. Quite true 3. No	9 22 19
Abolition of RTE & NCPCR	1. Yes 2. Some are useful, some should be abolished. 3. No	1 28 21

somewhat distracting (n = 22). Regarding the abolition of RTE/NCPCR, 28 respondents felt some aspects were useful, 21 respondents opposed abolitions, and 1 respondent supported full abolition. Overall, teachers balance legal constraints with cautious disciplinary practices.

Allison et al. (2023) argued against the use of corporal punishment in schools; instead, they recommended the use of alternative nonviolent behavior interventions. Visser et al. (2022) observed that corporal punishment in schools had a detrimental effect on children's behavior and reduced their performance, according to a meta-analysis of published articles. Shukla and Singh (2013) argued that corporal punishments inhibit learning and students' accomplishment and suggested a reduction in their use; instead, they suggested the use of nonphysical disciplinary measures in classroom/school settings. Based on the survey of 50 in-service teachers in West Bengal, it is evident that modern educators strongly prefer positive, non-physical approaches to student discipline and argue against the use of corporal punishment in schools. In a modern society like India and elsewhere, inhuman practices such as corporal punishment are not appropriate or acceptable to promote.

6 Conclusion

Corporal punishment is a problem in our society. India is still dealing with problems of corporal punishment. The respondent in-service teachers overwhelmingly rejected corporal punishment, favoring reasoning, psychological methods, and moderate discipline strategies that foster respectful and supportive classroom environments. Loving, humorous, and engaging teachers were viewed as more inspiring than those relying solely on strictness or punishment. While legal frameworks like RTE and NCPCR moderately influenced teacher-student relationships and introduce some professional constraints, teachers largely manage to maintain effective interactions and high student engagement. Overall, the findings highlighted a shift toward empathetic, professional, and relationship-centered teaching practices, emphasizing care, respect, and motivation over fear or punitive measures.

7 Ethical statements

In this study, informed consent was obtained from the interviewer prior to participation.

8 Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this study.

9 Data availability statement

The data may be made available upon reasonable request.

10 Author contributions

Arpan Das: Conceptualization and writing original draft, review and editing. The author approved the final version of the manuscript.

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